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Suppose the Land You Own

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SUPPOSE THE LAND YOU OWN

By

Albert J. Garcia

B.A., California State University, Chico, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

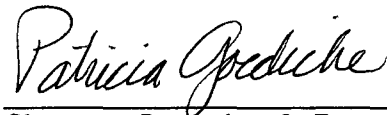
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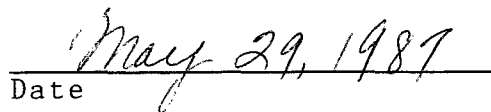
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ONE

The More You Think

Whether you die with an ax overhead
in the act of splitting walnut,
or whether you relax and smoke
your pipe in the cool shade,
closing your eyes, alone,
knowing it's the last time--

your wife will find friends
to haul in wood for winter.
Watching them stack it neatly,
the way you did, she'll invite them
to rest, stay for lunch.
If it's nice they'll drink iced tea
in lawn chairs on the back porch.
There might be apricot pie.

It's like you always said:
the work must be done.
So long as the lawn gets water
and tomatoes grow fat
in the sun, everything is fine.

And the more you think,
the less you see yourself
in the picture. Neighbor boys
fight to hoe and weed
your rose garden. Your wife
pays them well to wash your car.

And if she's been baking,
she'll serve something warm
with melting ice cream
where you often sit admiring
the curling smoke your pipe makes.

What Should be Harvest

The rancher picks at dry knuckles,
rubs in moisture from the window
where he watches his crop of walnuts
float in the puddled orchard.

His wife suggests he work
in the barn, forget
hulls splitting open.
But at this late point
only sweeping and picking remains.

Soon, mildew will set in,
yellow as the wall hanging
his wife works on,
jabbing her crochet hook through
the petal of a giant sunflower.

She's spent all day with laundry,
vacuuming the drapes, rearranging
the closet in the back bedroom.

He scratches his ankle,
the back of his neck,
looks to his wife's dustpan,
to his trees in the storm,
to the dimly-lit doorway
where boots and gloves wait.

Discovery While Felling the Shade Tree

7 a.m. and the hole surrounding
this mulberry trunk is deep enough
to bury our three hounds,
gawking into the pit,
ears perked at the steady shoveling.

"A little deeper," Dad says
just as his shovel clips off
something harder than root,
a jawbone, 2 or 3 teeth.

"Indian," he mumbles, and digs
around the rest of the skull,
the thin, mudcaked ribs.
"Must be a child."
The dogs peer in and drool.

I imagine a dead boy,
maybe my age or younger.

"What's that shining?" I ask.
Dad leans over and uncovers
some small pieces of pearly shell,
then tosses them back in the grave,
covers the bones with new dirt.

They lie undisturbed as he begins
his sawing--the tree
ripped by metal teeth.
And I keep seeing the blues and pinks
of abalone buried
two hundred miles from any ocean.

Something Important

Over there, against the branching orchard,
my uncle's house rests
in the huge loquat's shade. A skunk
shifts small paws
toward a sunspot on the lawn.

Nearby, a fourteen-year-old terrier
moves amid scratching and clucking hens.
The barn leans
but is steady, willing
and waiting for work.

From the highway
you think it's quaint--
seasons and harvests passing like minutes.

But I have been waiting a long time--
as one waits for friendship
or death--to see
the baby coons clinging
at my arms,
making adult faces in jest.

Family Dealings

At 4 a.m. Grandpa decided to hike
back to the homeplace
with its plum tree, its memories
of twenty years ago.

Everyone thought it amazing
that after being hit
by an oil truck which broke
half his bones, he lived at all.

After the funeral, we gathered at our house
and chatted and ate and laughed,
and talked about how it seemed
almost a party with our family.

Later, each of us would isolate
ourselves with a picture album,
remember the truck driver stumbling along
the road, the brash nurse,
the crowded church, intensely hot,
testing our strength.

At the Mailbox

My neighbor tells me the peaches
she's entered at the fair
could win this year's blue ribbon.
Though she's never caught me,
she knows I have eaten
some of the fattest, a few
hanging over my side of the fence.
The letter in her hand, she explains,
came from her daughter in Phoenix,
the one who studied so much.
The woman's shoulders, freckled brown,
remind me of when I'd watch her daughter read
by the pool, sunning her slight body,
as I worked with a shovel or hoe.
In my dented mailbox
is a circular from the supermarket.
The sun is strong
and I would like to be in my house.
But my neighbor keeps telling me
how her darling will be visiting
with her husband and new baby.
Just in time for the fair, she exclaims,
and goes on about her peaches.
She says with a half smile that she's worked
long and hard to raise them,
that I really ought to try some.

Visitor

From the kitchen window Mom and I
spot the lone roadrunner. He's been around
the yard this week, pecking
in the orchard, on the lawn.
He sure is ugly, says Mom. She's fascinated,
I can tell. Her face comes near the glass
and she waits for him to strut
from behind the roses. I saw him
the other day with a mouse in his beak,
she says. The lines on her face are beginning
to show. But she doesn't care.
Or maybe she does, but would rather concentrate
on how I'm doing. I hear
they kill rattlesnakes, I say, noticing
she wants my opinion. She never speaks
too long without an answer. Her eyes
look at me like I'm twelve again,
as though my hair isn't combed.
For the first time in my life I see her
longing for something she will never tell me.
He's kind of an ugly-handsome, she says,
I hope the dog doesn't scare him off.

Just About Gone

1

The obvious dream: I pull
thirteen inches of slick rainbow
and slap him in a waiting snowbank.
The lake, of course, is dark blue
and still. The air holds a chill
from the surrounding mountains--forest
frozen like my mustache. No trails
come here. I have been flown in
and landed on pontoons.

2

My wife: She pulls
a chair around. What am I reading?
Look at those pictures,
she says. She pulls a cat
onto her lap and rubs its fur
the right way and then the wrong way.
What kind of magazine is that? she asks,
her head at a curious angle.
What kind? I ask. What kind?

Tribal Custom

At mid morning, and again
at mid afternoon,
two heavy Atsugewi sisters,
the last, chant seasonal hymns,
display arrow points
and baskets woven
one generation before.
They as helpers, giving
the secret manzanita berry recipe,
part of their National Park Service,
just-ask-a-ranger,
natural history program.

Imagine them beside the creek,
these squatting matrons,
or on the meadowside gathering grasses,
or in the bark house
stirring meal till it boils
and blisters like lava.
Imagine, they ask a jogger
from Palo Alto, his cub
scout son whittling any shape
that happens to come.

The boy wonders if they ate
bear guts, why those people
give such names for lake,
deer, and sun. The man and wife
behind binoculars notice
the yellow fingernails
and cracked hands. They ask
if the sisters know
what kind of brown and white bird
just flew over.

Then, when everyone's sun has set,
the artifacts in padded boxes,
the boy and his parents drive off
in a panelled station wagon.
Nice family, one sister whispers,
and they are quiet,
until they get home.

To the Fisherman on Lake Shasta

When you're trolling your Rapala,
the lure just below the surface,
keep the pole in your hands,
feel a wobbling action, watch the tip
bob rhythmically in the air.

Controlling your boat speed, focus
on the way you imagine that lure
flashing under the waves. It must
resemble an injured minnow,
a stray fingerling in deep water.

Remember, big brown trout don't run
in schools, become wary of boats
recrossing the same snags in a cove.

Just think a thick-slab body
spilling from your ice chest, tail
spotted black, the great hooked jaws
opening and closing around air.

What you wouldn't give to feel
those jaws, slip fingers through
sharp red gills, heft him writhing
in the air, his small glass teeth
grating slightly at your knuckles.

At the I-5 Rest Stop

A woman scolds her daughter,
tells her she's too old
to be held. The husband,
banging under the hood
with a wrench, warns them both
to shut up, let him think.

Overhead, a canopy of eucalyptus
shades the picnic table
where a young Chinese couple
peer over their map. They share
a sandwich and some chips.

Trucks storm in and are gone.

In front of the men's room,
sparrows peck along the sidewalk,
barely moving for passing feet.

The Chinese couple clean their table,
kiss, drive off.

The man under the hood appears
with a sweaty face. He grabs
his daughter by one arm and throws
her into the backseat. The wife
sits silently on the passenger side.
When they're gone, the sparrows
rustle around in some loose leaves,
away from the hot transmission fluid
flowing toward the gutter.

Evening Run

Practice over, the high school track team trots off to the gym. Two shot putters lag behind, lobbing their steel ball between them. A man with thin white legs and a bare caved-in chest takes the track. He jogs slowly, strides feeble, knees buckling with each step. The two huge athletes decide they'll have some fun. They lumber onto the track with big smiles. Watcha doin', old man? they ask. Gettin' ready for the Olympics? He tries to veer around them, eyes fixed on the chalk lines. But they barge in front with their chests out. Here, catch, says the one with fatty white skin, tossing the twelve-pound shot to him. He jumps out of the way as a miniature crater is dented into the track. He can't believe they want to harm him. Aaaah, forget it, he's chicken, says the fat one's partner. And suddenly they pick up the shot and leave for the gym. Jogging again, the man doesn't notice his breathing is easier, his strides longer, his knees work smoothly without pain. He is only aware that his heart beats so hard and rapidly it hurts, that he'd better stop soon before something serious happens.

Robert Climbing Rope

Five-foot-five, 230 pounds,
Robert jumps and clamps
his hands, arms, and legs
around the thick rope,
fingers whitening, face bursting
with sweat. Our whole PE class
cheers as he inches up
a few agonizing feet
until he can pull
no more, his body
spent, suspended
like a manatee
floating in an aquarium.
We remember Robert's father,
the school janitor, pulling him
behind the cafeteria,
beating him,
calling him "Fatty"
for not making the varsity
football squad.
He's never climbed this far
before. Twirling slowly
on the rope,
the flesh of his chest,
thighs, and belly shivers
like white pudding
out of its bowl.
He grits his teeth,
as if willing himself
the twenty remaining feet.
And the class stares,
quieting slowly, until silence
envelops the gym,
his few small grunts
the only sound left.

Last Resort

1

Across the highway
dented pickups turn
and rattle fenders down
Cone Grove Road. Boys
tip farm-supply caps
to sweating cattle. Girls
tug halters, leaving
just enough white.

2

They swim hard, pair up,
drain the bottle, themselves,
passing news
of a newsless county:
Man cracked his head
upstream on the rocks, the mill
laying off again,
Molly from high school--
messed up for good.

Fourth of July, Red Bluff City Park

Fireworks are only half
the show. A blonde
in cutoffs and halter
kicks up one sandal,
catches it, and slaps
her boyfriend on the head,
shouting, Goddam,
didya see that big green
and silver one, Tony?

Tony has his eye
on the high school girls
laughing by the dock.
In the moonlight
they kick water all over
themselves, so that everything
--the river, the sky, the beads
of spray flying from their toes--
reflects the show
of fire in the night.

Tony's girl says, Look at 'em,
God, they think they got the best
damned bodies here.
She decides it's time to leave.
Tired of all these
kids running around, she says.

*

From her porch they watch
the grand finale
explode over the distant river.
Giggling, she tugs
at Tony's arm, leading him
into the house. On the couch
she says, Let's get married.
Hell, why not?
Tony looks around
for where he put his beer.

*

In early morning dark,
Tony gone for hours,
she paces room to room,
then outside down whichever streets
her feet will take her.
She arrives
at the empty park, walking
slowly though the littered grass.
At this hour the heat
still makes her sweat.
Stepping onto the dock,
she glances around, strips,
and dives into the cool river.

TWO

Tackle Box

I look for one lure
among spinners, spilled leader,
corks of hackled hooks,
one with a lucky gold eye
and action sure to produce.

It's like choosing a friend
from a long and tattered life.
She chooses you or you both choose
each other. The weavings of past
acquaintances somehow untangle
and move, naturally, to the present.

The box is the key. It holds
everything. Look here--a nightcrawler
from Montana crusted on the bottom,
matches in case of rain, and here,
here, the rumpled address...

Current

Suppose the land you own
borders the wrong side of the river.
Each year your pasture crumbles
into the mud current
and mixes with your neighbor's soil.
Your empty house looms closer
toward scattered green willows
crawling up the steep bank.
The cottonwood you proposed under
leans over and drags
its leaves on the calm surface.

You dip in tired fingers
and feel the river's cold.
Even the sun's heat
is stolen by careless water.
Through the current's depth you stare
at the dark backs of migrating shad.
Years have passed
since you cast for them,
felt them pull your lean arms--
the strongest fish you ever fought.

A River's Mood Changes

Alone, on the way to fishing
my autumn riffle,
I think last night,
on your steps--you smiled. Maybe
that steelie will chance it,
go for the glow-
bug, bend my morning in arcs
with wild runs and leaps.

Like you, a river's mood changes
as morning spreads color,
bringing beauty in slowly.
A man arrives in low light,
eating little,
finding shore and casting.

Anticipation comes with dark.
Eyes adjust to the dim, words
travelling one way.
Patience is the key, you said,
and I throw my line,
your face glowing over the bank,
your hair rippling like thoughts
downstream to quieter water.

There Comes a Meadow

In time the lake fills in. First
the shallows then the cool dark
places with smaller life.
As if someone wise planned,
long ago, the first curled grasses
and thin red flowers.

 The trees
behind you still shadow
one side or the other. Lighting
damselflies know this. Deer step gently,
as you should, nosing toward
subtle water.

 Understand
this can't remain. Lazy
sediments sift downstream.
Tall pines creak, shiver,
and settle. Eventually you must
decide if you want this--then concede
you are nothing to stop it.

Pond Visit

I want to rest my body
on the surface of this still,
reflecting pond, until some
girl stands, toes in the water,
breaking her own new picture
by lifting them. I'll see pure
blue sky and cedars looming
close up. I'll dip eye level
to the stilling photograph
in the water, of the girl.

Canyon Venture

Here's a creek and a canyon
with boulders the size of houses.

They shine silvery granite
and grow no moss. As I fish here,

twenty feet above the water,
never catching a thing,

I tie a bare gleaming hook
to my weighted leader, cast

into slamming white water.
Latching into a rock crevice,

I pull without thought or care
until the line snaps.

A release. The sun has come out
and made the boulders warm.

I lie down, carve some cheese--
fall asleep with a piece in my mouth.

Some sparrows come pecking around
and wake me. The sky is glare.

A breeze brings the creek to my nose.
A large bird's shadow sweeps

across the granite, circling,
then drifting out of sight.

Moment of Cow

She lugs
her cow body
across the dusk pasture
dragging
her udder
to the waterhole.

At the deertrail
her huge brown eyes
blink
at a doe springing
casually
over the fence.

The Lure

Up ahead, a mother grouse
clucks her chicks off the path
and warns them to stay still.
I veer around to observe
from a stump, wait silently
for spotted down to peep out
from the bush.

The hen tries to lure me
up the hill, fanning her gray tail
in the open.

These things always happen
when it's hot, when air rings with gnats
and dry pines stand drooping
under the weight of their cones.
As I watch, I can't help
feeling the danger I present,
the hen's small heart fluttering
in her eyes.

She wants me to follow her.

Everything quiets in the brush,
but I know better.
If I walk up and pull
the branches apart, they'll be huddled
in the dust, shivering,
cowering away
from the shadow of my hand.

Heron

On a sandbar downstream
a great blue heron
thrusts his slender neck and gawks
his pointed head along the water.

Feeding, he turns
and watches me lunch
on the rocks. I chew my sandwich
thinking his movements the same
as Uncle Carl's, county game warden,
who arrives at family gatherings
showing pictures of deer carcasses
missing one hind quarter.

Wading into a riffle, the heron
spears a small perch.
He throws his head back,
swallowing in violent gulps,
Has he tasted
the two boys who drowned
last week by Woodson Bridge?

With no warning, the bird
slaps the water with giant wings,
lifts, flies close overhead,
squalling prehistoric sounds
for the valley to hear.

Eagle Poem

It's hard to approach an eagle
in a poem. I could say
I saw one perched majestically
above a river, preening himself.
But you've seen him too,
skimming the water with talons clenched
around a small bass, beads of light
dripping through the air. We've all
experienced the young mouths gaping
for regurgitation, wings beating
the manured nest. It's a picture
we carry around when we're burning
for peace. Some of us anger
if one is crippled in a zoo.
But we forget the mouse
who busies himself in a meadow.
One day he carries blades of grass
across the warm dust,
and at the last moment sees
the sky filling with huge claws.

The Porcupine

Passing on the highway I couldn't see
his small black eyes, the placid expression
of the rodent face I discovered
after stopping. He didn't appear
dead, quills on end,
blooming in beige and black,
until I lifted him with my boot,
finding the gaping cavity
in his coarse-furred underbelly.

It made my insides roll
to think of his terror, his knowing
running wouldn't help.
His eyes showed that serenity
my father's had by the river,
talking cattle prices and erosion.

Behind us stood a small fir sapling
stripped white, with neatly-gnawed edges.
He'd just eaten, was probably searching
for a hollow log to sleep in.

Or maybe he'd just waddled free
from a bobcat. Maybe his senses
faltered in the roar of traffic.
Or the wind was wrong...

I kicked his body into the bushes.
Maybe I was making excuses
for an animal with too-short legs
and a wise, familiar face.

Animal Sense

Picking up deer antlers is one thing. Keeping them means a porcupine will go without minerals. They gnaw on them. And they'll chew the sides on your house too if you're gone for a week, if the paint or glue tastes salty.

The point being that safety is natural around huge, leaning firs and fog over water. Safety in the animal sense, that is. Black beady eyes seeing only shades of forest might mistake a tree for a tree, a rock for a rock, a rock for something to crush with.

Remains

Dad said a stump will keep sap
for many years, waiting. A shoot
will hide away, barely
alive but ready.

You'll notice
the clumped grass tries to disguise
a stump, covering the saw
wounds and flaking bark.

If you look right down
its rings, you'll find valleys between
sinking toward the soil and wanting
a glimmer of light.

Laborer's Day

As you hurry down the trail, mountains
jump from the lake's surface, reflections
of trees growing sharper. Then your face.
When your eyes blink away
the last water, and the images still,
little squirming grubs appear
between broken sticks
and pine needles on the bottom.

One fellow carries around his house
of sand and mud,
waiting for the hatch.
He could be a little man
just come in from the mill,
tired of pulling greenchain
for twenty years, and prices
set down by the company store.

Your own set face
rebounds from the surface.
You know the story too well.
The water here is always
chilled. Old cedars peer down
with beards of red bark. The sun
begins watch at early morning,
supervising the valley
from one end to the other.

Glacial

Slowly, deliberately,
he worked this range,
carving, picking up, depositing
himself evenly around him.

But years later someone notices:
the gentle U-shape of the valley,
the granite polished smooth and silent.

Watching the Whales

They swell huge and gray
with water, rolling, giving
glimpses of barnacled whale back--
back up and back down and never
near enough to see the source of spray.

Smarter
than people they've become,
and they'll know we're watching
their herd for some nonwhale purpose,
marveling with knowledge
of their brain size.

Later,
when gray turns black, we'll go
down to the wharf to eat
and drink in a family way.
The conversation will turn the wine
to waves.

We'll say we're brothers,
and we'll go back tomorrow, early,
to get in touch and feel
our weight and power.

A Clear Night on Lassen Peak

We start in near dark and climb
up the ashen path of black
dacite lava. Lassen Peak eclipses
the moon, lowers autumn stars
we want to touch.

At the crater's rim
imagined shadows shift:
Buried alive in warm rubble
a man was left for dead
in the last eruption--then stood up
to find his friends.

Our weak legs
strain as we scale this barren dome,
each step a Yana prayer to earth.
Flashlights scan the trail
switching back and up along the rim
to the highest crag.

It's not active
but not dead according to the guidebook.
Dormant, waiting, the ranger's words.
The stars are so big and close here
they seem to swirl. The mountain
almost moves.

Lava

We watch the evening newsclips
of Kilauea's lava
spilling into the Pacific:
panoramic views with streams
winding thin and orange
through lush fields, closeups
of molten paste below black crust,
underwater shots of boulders
glowing, crackling.

Amazing,
she says, reaching for her wine.
Like blood from a wound.

She's entranced, as if the flow
in Hawaii were only for her.
I can feel the way she'd love
to be there, to warm her hands
over a hissing fumerole.
And the lava itself, something
beckons us to dive
into the flowing jelly, bathe
in its inviting heat.

Outside
a slushy snow falls
but we notice only the footage
of men rushing to sandbag
a gully, the lava
breaking through and pouring over
a hillside toward expensive homes.
No stopping it, I say, feeling
I must say something.

She stares
as if the earth's opening
were widening right before her.
I imagine the heat blowing over us,
creating a wind, breath
from our own planet,
a force like the sun
flaring up from underground.